

Peace of Mind

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First published in Bar Briefs, Spring 2003
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This is the twelfth article from the Supreme Court of Ohio Advisory Committee on Mentally Ill in the Courts, which focuses on effectively dealing with mentally ill offenders in the criminal justice system. This article highlights the Planned Lifetime Assistance Network of Central Ohio (PLAN-CO) which provides personalized planning services to enhance quality of life for disabled family members, and much more.

During almost 25 years of advising clients on their estate planning needs, I have often found myself challenged with them to find a way to help families with disabled children as they faced continuity of care issues.

A client, whose child with minor brain damage from birth and diagnosed in high school with OCD Depression, recently introduced me to a wonderful new resource. While the child had an excellent care plan currently in place, I was intrigued by the arrangement for continued care the family had created with a new non-profit organization called Planned Lifetime Assistance Network of Central Ohio ("PLAN-CO"). From my perspective, and after a thorough examination of their estate plan, they appeared to have a strong plan in place for the entire family, including a succession plan for caring for their disabled child. The family's foremost concern was not merely financial planning for the child's future following his parents' demise. Rather, they were focused on finding lifetime advocates to champion the child's needs now before they were no longer available to act as his number one care giver. In fact, I was so interested and impressed with PLAN-CO's services, I began working with its board of trustees.

PLAN-CO's program for care of dependents with disabilities is part of the National PLAN Alliance, a nationwide network of 28 affiliates in 22 states. PLAN-CO provides a structure, a venue, if you will, for pulling together the many pieces of a complete plan of care. When started in 1999, the main goal was to "enhance the quality of life for the disabled family member now and in the future." Fast forward to today and you now have an organization which helps families with the basics of life. Those details that most fully independent souls take for granted.

Companionship

PLAN-CO links families and the disabled youngster or adult with others who are in similar situations. No matter what your zip code, it's hard to find a neighborhood group where 100% of the members understand the battles you face with insurance companies who reject medical claims for experimental

therapies, or school systems who deny mainstreaming your "different" child into the traditional school setting.

Through PLAN-CO, families find this and more in the monthly support groups and social gatherings with other families. Such events, while often informal, provide great opportunities for referrals for services and solutions for unique problems facing the disabled.

Linkage to community resources and service coordination

The upside of Ohio's dense population is that a myriad of grass-roots and government agencies exist to provide pieces of the care plan for dependents with disabilities. But, finding and accessing them (determining eligibility) can be a full-time job for parents. PLAN-CO's licensed social workers identify the services needed by members then link families with the appropriate local, state or federal agency, or other service provider. PLAN-CO professionals also work to decrease roadblocks to access these services through advocacy on behalf of the families, many of whom find that the constraints of work keep them from contacting certain service agencies during regular business/daytime hours.

PLAN-CO's staff experience also works to coordinate care services so that families and their disabled family member are not faced with the frustration of duplication of services or, worse yet, loss of a specific service.

Continuum of care

Most important in the continuum of care is how PLAN-CO steps in and coordinates and oversees all of the disabled dependent's care after Mom and Dad are no longer able to do so. Set up on a personalized fee-for-service basis, PLAN-CO staff monitor the disabled family member's overall social, mental and health care for the remainder of his/her lifetime. Supportive services such as public benefits are provided in addition to transportation to doctors appointments, residential care centers, entertainment activities, etc.

PLAN-CO's clients achieve the peace of mind that their loved one will receive such a complete program of care. Life Skills Assistance, for example, is one aspect of care a family naturally provides in the home, but when the disabled family member is living in the non-family environment, this aspect of growth and development can progress with the proper assistance.

Crisis Intervention is also a mainstay of PLAN-CO's services. Taking care of a disabled child or adult is a job with no beginning or ending point, so caregivers and other family members can often face situations beyond their control or knowledge. PLAN-CO social workers are available 24-hours a day,

7 days a week to step in and provide expertise in managing any care crisis.

Advocacy for the disabled family member is the final aspect of the overall plan (picture) which PLAN-CO offers. While each client has immediate needs of food, housing and general health care, each also can face challenges in accessing protective and beneficial services guaranteed under state and federal law, including such matters as mainstreaming into school systems, accessing public transportation and obtaining approval for experimental drug therapies. PLAN-CO serves as the disabled client's advocate to pursue these services and remedies and can involve agencies such as Ohio Legal Rights and the ADAMH Board to challenge organizations and policy makers who are denying services.

Estate planning and legal resources

Through monthly meetings and frequent seminars and workshops, PLAN-CO educates families on the supplemental financial planning that needs to be put in place so that the disabled family member has funds available to pay for future service without jeopardizing public agency assistance. Siblings are often relieved to know that there are specific plans in place addressing financial and legal issues.

To find out more about PLAN-CO, or refer clients to its services, contact the main office at (614) 224-2047. Brochures and other informational materials are available.

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